

**Remarks by Gary Snyder for the California Biodiversity Council
Grass Valley / Nevada City
June 6, 1996**

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Biodiversity Council, resource specialists, planners, elected officials, conservationists, businesspersons, watershed workers and neighbors - greetings. And to visitors, welcome to the Wolf Creek subdrainage of the South Yuba, in the gentle meadows of Grass Valley, here in the North Central Sierra.

I thank the Biodiversity Council for bringing us together in this way. I have great respect for those who conceived and actualized the formation of the California Executive Council on Biodiversity and its Memorandum of Understanding several years back. It is a ground-breaking concept that, as I understand it, seeks to bring resource management more into harmony with the realities of landscapes and local populations.

I'm a long-time forest and mountain person of the west coast. I grew up on a farm outside Seattle. My father and uncles all worked at various times in logging and fishing, and I started off on one end of a two-man saw when I was 11. I've worked in the woods from the Canadian border down to Yosemite. I've fought fire, built trails, been on lookouts, scaled timber, and set chokers and been active in regard to forestry issues since I was 17 - when I first wrote my representative in Congress in regard to management matters in the Olympic National Forest. And, I've been involved in a lot of forest, river, and economic questions locally. I'm honored to have been given this assignment, and I'll try not to overlap with the content of the daytime meetings, but provide yet another perspective.

I'd like to talk about two things tonight: the possibility of sustainable forestry in the Sierra, and - the particular theme of this meeting - fire. Speaking of fire, when I was a self-righteous youth in my twenties I thought that my jobs as fire lookout and firefighter gave me a real moral advantage - I told my city friends "Look - when I do this kind of work I can really say I'm doing no harm in the world, and am only doing good." Such ironies. Now I get to join in the chorus that says it was all wrong-headed, even if well-intentioned. (--Almost as bad as when I climbed to the summit of Mt. St. Helens up in Washington at age 15 and announced "this beautiful mountain will long outlast the cities." Now the mountain is half gone, and the cities are doing fine.)

This North Central Sierra area, especially here on the west side, is not quite as charismatic and scenic as the southern Sierra. We have no Yosemite valley, or Kings River Canyon, but we do have some exquisite little high country lakes and many meadows rich in summer flowers; some high white granite ridges and snowfields. In the mid-elevations we have some of the finest pine forest in the world. The lower foothills are manzanita fields and extensive oak grasslands that have been changing, during the last two decades, from cattle to suburbs.

In the watersheds of the American, Feather, and Yuba river systems are some of the loveliest streams in California, a few with top quality trout fishing. The oak and brush lands are major migratory songbird nesting territory - I know because my wife Carole is out early at least one morning every week mist-net-trapping, banding, & collecting the data on the little things. Deer and wild turkeys grace the front yards of people all across the foothills. My wife and I, and many of our friends, are among those who welcome back the bears and cougars, even while recognizing the risk. We didn't move up here to live the soft, safe and easy life, and we love having these hairy scary neighbors. We will try to figure out how to be safe and smart, even though they're around. One can always buckle on a bear-attack pepper spray cannister when going for a lone jaunt. And speaking of lone jaunts, John Muir's famous adventure - that he wrote about in *The Mountains of California* - of climbing high up into a Sugar Pine during a severe windstorm - took place a few ridges over, near Challenge. I'm sure everyone in this room has some stories to tell about what they've seen and where they've been in this marvelous landscape.

Our North Central Sierra shares its geological and biological history with the rest of the Great Sierran ecosystem. There are registered paleo-Indian sites in this county that indicate human presence from eight thousand years ago. The pre-contact forest was apparently a mosaic of various different forest stages, including many broad and open ancient-forest stands. Spring and fall run salmon came up all the rivers. Deer, salmon, waterfowl from the valley, and black oak acorns were the basis of a large and economically comfortable native population, a people who made some of the most skilful and artistic baskets in the world.

The Yankee newcomers initially came to look for gold. They needed lumber, and thought, (as newcomers did everywhere else in North America), that the forest was limitless. One can see early photographs taken around the foothill towns, and the hills are denuded. It's a tribute to the resilience of the local forest-type that where allowed to, it has come back quite well. So early on there was the vigorous mining industry and extensive logging. Later much of the mountain land was declared public domain and it came to be the responsibility of the US Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. The USFS from the twenties up until the seventies was a confident and paternalistic organization that thought it always knew best, and for a while maybe it did. During those years it was generally trusted by both the conservation movement and the timber industry. In any case, from the 50's on there was a lot of heavy industrial logging in the public and private lands of the Sierra.

With the seventies came a renewed rise of environmental concern. Part of that consciousness was connected maybe to better biology education in the schools, and a general rise of interest in nature. Curious people got out in the mountains by pickup, on foot, or by bike and sometimes studied the areas that had been logged. People could see that old growth habitat was shrinking. We all knew that some species were being lost or endangered (the wolf and grizzly already gone; probably the wolverine); & there were rumors that the remaining public forest was being logged in the same old way, sometimes at an actual financial loss to the taxpayers. The public became aware, as never before, of its stake in the Sierra Nevada.

So we entered an era of re-evaluation and reconsideration of past policies. The USFS unfortunately lost much of the respect of the conservation community, and it also got hammered by the timber industry. For a while it looked like the Forest Service couldn't win, whatever it did. There have been some highly contested issues: for conservationists, extensive clear-cutting became symbolic of how the federal land managers seemed to be hostage to the timber economy; and the Spotted Owl became symbolic to the timber industry of hated environmental regulations, and money-losing issues involving critters that almost nobody has ever seen. The owl itself is a hapless and innocent bird which never meant to cause so much trouble. The gold rush era has left many worthy legacies in this land; it also leaves some people with a sort of "use it up" attitude; while the newcomers who arrived from the seventies and after were quick to love nature, but seemed to have little concern for the economy. During the hearings that led to the establishment of Redwood National Park up on the north coast a sawmill operator supposedly testified "Why nobody ever goes in those woods but hippies and their naked girl-friends" - well, some of those girls went back to college and became lawyers.

These wrangles have led some of us to try and figure out where the different parties, those able and willing to argue in sincerity and good faith, might find areas of agreement. The fairly recent realization that the Sierra Nevada is a fire-adapted ecosystem, and that a certain amount of wildfire has historically been necessary to its health, has given everyone at least one territory within which they can agree. Another such area of potential agreement is the growing awareness that we will sooner or later have to do long-range sustainable forestry. In fact, the two absolutely go together. If we don't reduce the fuel load the really big fires that will inevitably come will make good forestry a moot point. But it will take a little more than new fire policies to achieve good forestry.

I was on a panel in San Francisco several years with Jerry Franklin the eminent forest scientist now based at the University of Washington. So last month I took it on myself to write him the following question:

"When I talk to the Biodiversity Council in June, I would like to be able to say something like this: 'Long range sustainable forestry practices - that will support full biodiversity - and be relatively fire-resistant - and also be on some scale economically viable - over centuries - is fully possible. And what we must now do is search out and implement the management program that will do that.' Do you think I can say this and the science will support it? Any comments?"

Jerry Franklin immediately wrote me back,

"What you propose is totally and absolutely feasible for the Sierra Nevada. I.e., long-term sustainability, full biological diversity, relative fire resistance (low probability of catastrophic crown fire), and economic viability. A system which provides for restoration and maintenance of a large diameter tree component (with its derived large snags and down logs) and which provides for moderate to high levels of harvest in the small and medium diameter classes (allowing escapement of enough trees into the large diameter class to provide replacements for mortality in the large diameter group) and prescribed

burning in some locations can do this. Other considerations include riparian protection and, perhaps, shaded fuel breaks. Economic and sustainable in perpetuity!"

So it's theoretically possible. But science can only suggest - such a marvelous sustainable forestry cannot actually happen unless the culture itself chooses that path. "The culture" means not only the national public, but the working people of the very region where the resource policy decisions are made. It will take local people working together with local land managers, I am convinced, to begin making serious changes in public lands management, place by place.

Just a quarter of a century ago, the idea of serious local input into public land decision-making would have been thought pretty novel. One of the reasons we could trust the people of the Sierra to provide useful input has to do with how much the local people have, on their own, seem to have learned. In the twenty five years I've lived in this part of the Sierra there has been a growing contribution of forest knowledge from a multitude of fine semi-amateur naturalists. Just here in Nevada County we have seen the formation of a California Native Plant Society Chapter, the local production of a hiking guide to the region, a locally written and published bird species check-list, a fine botany of a high country lake region by a person of the area, a similar low-elevation wildflower guide, and the detailed forest inventories done by volunteers on San Juan Ridge. There's a sophisticated locally based research project on Pileated Woodpecker behaviour, family life and reproduction going on right now. Extensive research has been done on the stream systems and main rivers of the Yuba by another set of volunteers. And many of us are in debt to the esteemed Lillian Mott for her generous help in identifying mushrooms.

Also the forestry and biology experts of the Tahoe National Forest, the B.L.M., and the schools, have been generous in sharing their time and expertise with ordinary citizens. And timber operators also have visited at least one school I know of, Grizzly Hill, and allowed children to come and observe a logging show. There are a number of significant citizens organizations in the North Central Sierra. Many are focussed on ecological issues, and some are concerned about access to resources. They all have a stake in the health of the Greater Sierran Ecosystem. This process of the newcomers becoming a "people of the place", which started in 1849, and has been making progress at variable speeds ever since, has surged ahead I'd say in the last two decades.

For new fire and forestry practices to really become national public policy, they must be local public choices, first.

Us locals can help bring this to reality by getting involved with the BLM and USFS in further community forestry projects; in working toward innovative value-added local wood-products industries, and also of course own choices, our congresspersons might just represent us, and there'd be a good chance the federal policies on our regional public lands would reflect that. The agencies could facilitate this process by being a lot more willing to take risks with the public than they've been so far, putting more of their people out in the field where they meet folks, looking for opportunities to try to break out and try things with locals.

There has always been fire. The catfaces on the oaks, the multiple stems sprouting from certain old oak centers, and the black cedar stumps that seem to never go away, made it clear to me that there had been a sizeable fire through my land at some point in time. The venerable Jimmy Coughlin, now passed on, told me of a big burn some sixty years back. Whenever it was, our little forest is recovering well. This Sierra ecosystem has been fire-adapted for millions of years, and fire can be our friend. The growing recognition of this fact - both with the public and with the Fire agencies, has been a remarkable change to watch over during the past ten years. In my own neighborhood, which some of you will visit tomorrow, a small prescribed burn was done this spring with considerable success. And we have also been trying out the mechanical crunching of brushfields - expensive, but it works.

One word of caution, however. As our enthusiasm for prescribed burns and more sophisticated fire management grows, we need to remember for a moment the fire ideologies and bureaucracies of the past. Steve Pyne, in his book *World Fire*, traces the history of the American wildfire-fighting establishment, and the way it demonized fire as an enemy. He points out how the language of forest firefighting for years ran parallel to the language of the Cold War - almost militaristic, and speaking of forest fires as though they were Godless Communist armies. Firefighting requires organization, courage, and tremendous energy and dedication, to be sure. But we are called to a more complex moral attitude now, where we see fire as a partner in the forest, even while recognizing its power to do damage. I would hope that the statewide enthusiasm for the new fire management is received with a certain humility on the part of the firefighting establishment, even as it gears up to take the lead in the new policies.

The understanding of fire - its hazards, its use as a tool, and the way it shapes a fire-adapted forest, should help keep our different factions working together. We may disagree as to how important the survival of some species might be, or as to how many acres of land should reasonably be converted to suburbs, or as to what the annual allowed timber cut ought to be, but we surely will agree that we're against tall flames burning timber and houses, and that we should work together for a "fire management" that sees fire as a partner in the ecosystem, not an enemy. This may be a wonderful step toward new and more amicable relations between the conservationists, who want to go slow and be careful, and the Resource users, who have their businesses to run.

There's another hard fact here that I haven't mentioned. It may be the most important factor of all. Our whole area is experiencing an amazing rate of growth, which brings suburban homes right up against wildlife habitat, public forests, or mineralized zones. These new uses will be in conflict with both loggers and environmentalists. The public lands will become all the more precious to us, as ranches and farms give way to development.

The public lands are lands held in trust for all of us. A certain responsibility goes with that, for the government, the public at large, and for the people of the region. As for stewardship, or trust, the whole world is in the trust of humans now, whether we want this responsibility. The air and waters, the rivers, the deer and owls, the genetic health of

all life, is in our trust. This Council here is called Biodiversity - a word that sends shivers of alarm through some hearts - but it only means variety of life, and it means "Right to Life for Others", a moral sentiment I feel inclined to religiously support. So - lastly - here's a word for biodiversity. If God hadn't wanted all these critters to be around, including rattlesnakes and cougars, he wouldn't have put them on the Ark. The high country and the forests are the twenty-first century Ark of the Sierra, an Ark even for all of California. Let's be sure it's an ark that will float. Let's not try to second-guess God.

Gary Snyder
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